

A portrait of the writer as a young Viking

Odin must be appeased.

That's how fantasy novelist Stephan Grundy explains it, as he leans gracefully over the table at Los Vaqueros restaurant, grasps a stone dangling from a leather string around his neck, dips a slim finger into his frozen margarita and wipes the slush across the rock's face.

What at first appeared to be a piece of rock, in fact, reveals itself as a human head the size of a gnome's fist. It has bushy hair, a flattened nose, a beard and moustache, and a slightly disapproving expression. It has only one eye; the other is hidden beneath a flap. The artifact, which Stephan designed himself, is carved to resemble the face of one of the central gods of Norse mythology. This is Odin: he is Stephan's personal god.

"Odin," Stephan says, in a tremulous and highly enunciated voice, "is the god of many things in my religion, which is Norse and consists of a pantheon of many gods, each representing different things. Odin, or Wotan, is the god of death. He is also the god of poetry and song, of creativity and artistic expression."

Stephan smiles, half embarrassed. "But most important, for our purposes at this table, he is the god of drink and celebration. Every time I have a drink, I am *compelled* to make a small offering of it to Wotan."

This sunny afternoon, Wotan has reaped a bounty of libations. Stephan is on his sixth frozen margarita—or is it the seventh? A waitress arrives and Stephan politely requests another round. In the swirl of icy liquor, numerical precision vanishes like a fjord in morning fog. Yet Stephan Grundy seems unaf-



The Mythic Journey of Stephan Grundy

fect. His constitution is impressive—or, if you're trying to keep up with him, alarming.

Grundy doesn't look like the stereotypical Norse warrior-poet from Dallas. A 27-year-old clad in vaguely medieval-look-

Continued on page 12



By Matt Zoiler Seitz

Prodigiously gifted and precocious, Stephan Grundy wrote his first novel at 15. "By college," says one instructor, "that kid didn't need a teacher. He needed an agent."

Mythic Journey

Continued from page 10

ing trousers and a puffy pirate shirt, Grundy is well-muscled but small of frame. He has a gently rounded face dusted with freckles, and his bowl-cropped, corn-colored hair makes him a ringer for the Sunday comics' Prince Valiant. His low voice is soft and precise, his speech so formal and eloquent it sounds as if he's receiving prewritten dialogue through a hidden earpiece. He begins all requests—even giddy ones for more margaritas—with "If it's not too much bother," and ends them with "If that would be all right."

The low-key facade belies Stephan's startling literary accomplishments. In 1992, *Rhinegold*, his meticulously detailed and thrillingly violent Norse tale about Wotan and his worshipers, was bought by a German publisher, translated, and issued in hardcover in Germany. Fans of fantasy fiction and historical novels there devoured the work, which fuses both genres in its epic retelling of the roots of Germanic mythology.

Tapping into the nation's post-Cold War zeitgeist, the book—rejected by several prominent American publishers—shot to number one on the German fantasy charts and prompted *Der Spiegel*, Germany's equivalent of *Time* magazine, to profile Grundy.

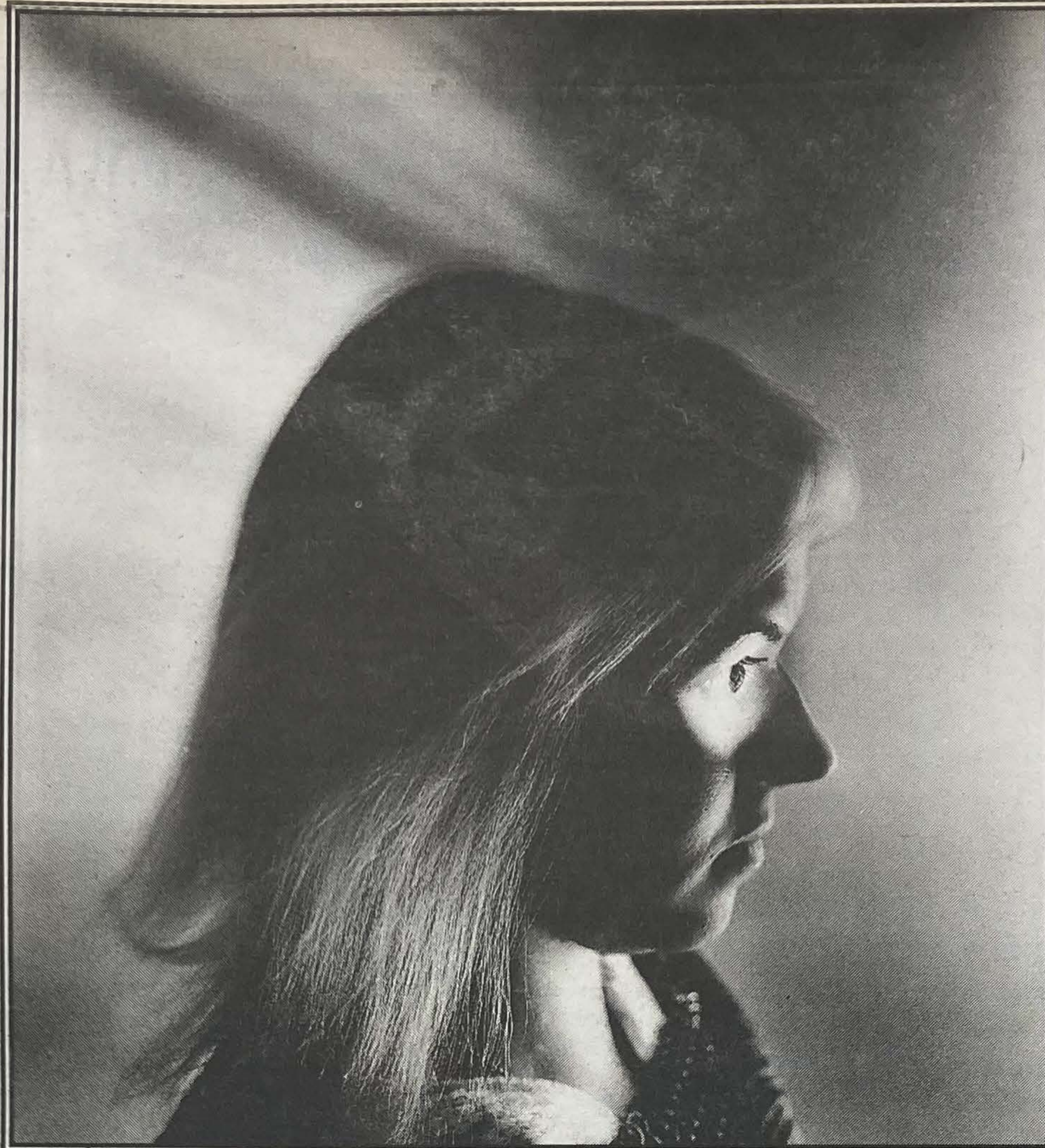
And this past April, Bantam, one of the world's largest purveyors of fantasy novels, picked up *Rhinegold* and published it in hardcover in the States. Today, Bantam is stoking a bidding war for the film and paperback rights.

If that were the only item on Grundy's life résumé, it would be enough—especially for a young man who, just three years ago, was donning a mortarboard to attend graduation at Southern Methodist University.

But there's more. He is finishing his doctoral degree in Norse studies at Cambridge University in England, where he's writing a dissertation on Wotan. Under the pseudonym Kveldalf Gundarrson, he wrote two reference books on Norse mythology, *Teutonic Magic* and *Teutonic Religion*, and has edited *Our Troth*, a book of essays. He plays piano, harp, bagpipes, guitar, and numerous brass and woodwind instruments. He can read and write in runes—Germany's ancient alphabet—and speaks several tongues, including German, Icelandic, Dutch, and Latin.

Grundy rarely travels a distance without his warrior gear—mead horn, medicine pouch, chain mail armor, shield, and a custom-forged broadsword. His arms and legs are dotted with tiny, self-inflicted scars; according to the dictates of Wotan, a warrior cannot unsheathe his magical sword unless it tastes blood. And since he sword fights regularly with classmates at Cambridge, and they aren't particularly keen on satisfying Wotan's bloodlust themselves, Stephan carves fresh nicks into his limbs every week.

Stephan Grundy's story is that of a young man with one foot in a savage warrior past and another in the modern world of the information highway. This is the story of a



As an adolescent, Grundy worshiped Mordred, the black sheep of the Arthurian legend. "He was more aware than anyone of the dark side of Camelot."

boy who learned to read before he could tie his shoelaces and struggled through youth with a rare medical condition that left his body elflike and feminine and branded him a borderline freak clear through adolescence: the boy, in fact, lived as a girl.

Most of all, it is the story of a prodigiously gifted author who, at an age when most people are struggling to hold down a spirit-crushing nine-to-five job, is living full-time in a strange and extraordinary world of ideas, getting paid handsomely for the privilege, and winning comparisons to C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien.

"Every time I have a drink, I am compelled to make a small offering of it to Wotan."

Before you tell others you always felt like an outcast growing up, listen to the tale of Stephan Grundy.

Stephan Grundy's story begins in 1967 in New York City, where Lois Grundy, wife of Dr. Scott Grundy, gave birth to a baby boy.

According to Stephan, the designation of gender was very nearly arbitrary.

Doctors diagnosed the child as having a rare and severe deformity of the genitals and urinary system. The urethra, in particular, was so damaged that doctors feared they might not be able to fashion a complete male organ from it later in life. They told the Grundys that when Stephan finished growing, they believed it would be easier—surgically for them, and emotionally for Stephan—to render him female.

Stephan says his parents—Scott Grundy, a doctor specializing in nutrition who would later pioneer research into the effects of cholesterol on the cardiovascular system; and Lois Grundy, a longtime teacher of children with learning disabilities—were told by the doctors to choose a gender identity for their child and raise him that way from infancy until the end of adolescence.

"Hormonally he was male, but his sexual status and development were ambiguous," says Scott Grundy, now a professor of internal medicine at Dallas' Southwestern Medical School. "The ulti-

mate resolution of that issue was going to have to be delayed."

Stephan adds, "I wouldn't have been a woman in a complete sense—I would not be able to bear children. But since the surgeries really couldn't be undertaken until they were certain I was fully grown, it was quite risky either way. The doctors felt there would be a better chance at success if my family chose female."

The Grundys did just that. And the newborn baby became known as *Stephanie*.

He lived as a girl and was known as a girl. He was registered on school records as female through adolescence. "My genitals were so damaged," Stephan says, "that it was easy for me to believe that what I had was badly defective female equipment rather than almost nonexistent male equipment."

For 18 years, the Grundys kept up

appearances, treating Stephan as a little girl—up to a point. They rarely made the child wear dresses or play with dolls or embrace the reductive and stereotypical trappings of girlhood; instead, they clad him mostly in unisex garb, trimmed his hair in a short, tomboyish crop, and let him play, study, and socialize any way he chose.

For reasons not even the most brilliant experts of gender and identity understand, Stephan instinctively veered toward a male identity—not knowing that his chromosomes bore witness to his unstated preference. He never asked his parents why he felt like a male. "I was afraid they'd think I was completely crazy," he says.

And yet, perhaps because they sensed his confusion, his parents told him an artfully edited version of truth: that he'd been cursed by a bad throw of the genetic dice, and that his medical condition wrought havoc with his hormones. To an extent, this was true, and it was sufficient to explain why his body developed uncharacteristically strong muscles for a girl, endowed him with a lower-pitched, strangely boyish voice, and sprouted pubic hair at age seven, facial hair at 12.

A rising star in the world of medical research, Scott Grundy kept moving the family to pursue progressively better jobs. As a result, the Grundy clan, which included Stephan's older sister Pamela, lived in Phoenix, greater San Diego, and finally Dallas.

Lois Grundy, who comes from a long line of teachers, read to her kids when they were barely old enough to walk. Stephan quickly took control of the experience. "By the time he was around three and a half," she says, "he wouldn't tolerate being read to anymore. It was too slow for him."

At seven, he began writing full-blown stories and developed a charming confidence in his own authorial voice. "His stories became a private matter pretty early on," Scott Grundy says. "After a while he didn't even want you to read them to see what you thought. It bored him."

He had little interest in the usual childhood activities—team sports, church groups, television. Even on family trips, he'd take a stack of books and read in the car

while his family enjoyed the scenery. His expansive vocabulary branded him an egghead at school. "He knew a lot of big words," says Lois Grundy, "and tried to show them off whenever he could—which might not always have been to his best advantage."

But it amused his sister, also a fledgling writer, to no end. She used to show off her younger sibling—whom she thought of as a sister—to friends. "I'd give Stephan a copy of a difficult book like *Moby Dick* and have him read it out loud to us," she says. "He was maybe six at the time."

Stephan's life of the mind stood in stark contrast to woes of the flesh. His urethra was prone to severe and sometimes bloody infections, which often forced his parents to pull him from school for emergency treatment. "I became quite accustomed as a

child to the sight of my own blood," he says. "I even grew rather comfortable with it."

Even though he took a small pharmacy's worth of regular medication, Stephan was susceptible to all kinds of illnesses, and the condition took a toll on his psyche.

"It got so I was used to my parents whisking me off to the hospital every time I told them I felt a bit sickly," he says. "After a while, it became just as easy to picture them whisking me off to the nuthouse."

How or why the great love of his life was revealed at such an early age may always remain a mystery. Both mother and son recall it vividly.

They were shopping together at a bookstore in Solana Beach, a suburb of San Diego, when Stephan, then six, spotted a children's book called *Norse Gods and Giants*. It was a lavishly illustrated anthology of Norse legends covering such central figures as Wotan, god of death, creativity, and drink; Loki, god of fire and mischief; and Thor, god of thunder and fertility. Lois Grundy told Stephan that their ancestors—Scandinavians on her mother's side—used to worship these strange and unfamiliar deities.

Enraptured, Stephan saved up his minimal allowance for two months to buy the book. It cost \$6.95.

For reasons he says he'll never understand, soon he was building temples in the Grundy household out of chairs and pillows and composing his own prayers to pagan gods. He endured years of boring classes and frequent trips to the hospital with adult books on the Arthurian legends, ancient Egypt and Greece, and the Old Testament.

"The New Testament never made much of an impression on me," he says. "But the Old Testament was *violent*. It was *gory*. There were wars and sacrifices. And overlooking everything was this God doing horrible things to people for reasons no one could really fathom."

Stephan continued reading fantasy books embraced by a younger audience—especially *Star Trek* novels, Richard Adams' *Watership Down*, and C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*. He read key passages from his favorite books over and over to get his subconscious to replay them as he slept.

"All the kids' books I loved followed more or less the same formula," Stephan

says. "There's a kid who's an outcast, who's miserable, who nobody understands. And he's got this great power that nobody knows about. He has magical abilities—he's psychic. He's despised, but inside he's this amazing person."

With few exceptions, Stephan's childhood schoolmates ostracized him. They didn't want to get close to this little girl who looked and sounded like a boy and was enamored with Zeus and Cleopatra. "I would not say Stephan's time in school was a happy time," Scott Grundy says. "Not at all."

Stephan says: "In my head, I was violent. I was always secretly hoping that other people would pick fights with me, but they rarely did. I wonder if it wasn't because they somehow sensed that secretly I'd have liked nothing better in the world than to *shred* them."

Things didn't get much better when the Grundys moved again in 1981—this time to Dallas, where Scott Grundy had found work as a nutritional researcher at Southwestern Medical Center.

The family bought a small house near SMU. Stephan, then 14, enrolled at Highland Park High School. As before, he registered as Stephanie. And as before, he never felt the name fit him. So he chose another one: Adrian.

"It was neutral," he explains simply.

Trained on a variety of instruments in California, he joined the high-school band on tuba. He also parlayed his fascination with the Old Testament into a passion for Judaism, studying the Torah, eating only kosher food, and flirting briefly with the idea of becoming a convert. "I was impressed by the fact that it was a family tradition," Stephan says. "And it was also a tradition of a historically persecuted minority."

None of this sat well with Stephan's classmates at Highland Park. To them, "Adrian" Grundy was a spooky enigma—a hyperintelligent teen with long, straight hair and a weird asexual persona, fascinated with ancient cultures and religions, defiantly uninterested in getting them to understand or even like her—or him—or whatever.

As before, Stephan—Adrian—stayed a loner. He grew close to only a handful of people his own age, mostly fellow band members. Yet he never told any of them about his medical condition.

Stephan did grow especially close to one person at Highland Park High School—his English teacher, Priscilla Fullilove Fish, a free spirit who engaged Stephan in heated discussions about history and literature.

The two got into a passionate argument one day over Stephan's fascination with Mordred. Stephan identified with the character so strongly that he often wore a black T-shirt emblazoned with his name.

Mordred is the illicit son of King Arthur's half-sister, Morgwethe, the wife of King Lot of Orkney, Scotland. According to most versions of the legend, Arthur seduced Morgwethe and got her pregnant; then he sought to erase evidence of the deed by declaring that all children born on the first of May, including Mordred, be piled into a boat and set adrift in the ocean.

The boat wrecks; as fate would have it, only Mordred survives. He grows into a bloodthirsty, distrustful young man. Even though he becomes a member of the Round Table, Arthur and the other knights loathe him. While Arthur is away at war, Mordred seizes Arthur's wife and kingdom and names himself ruler of Camelot. When

Continued on page 17

RHINEGOLD

A NOVEL BY

STEPHAN GRUNDY



Bantam published *Rhinegold* in the United States.

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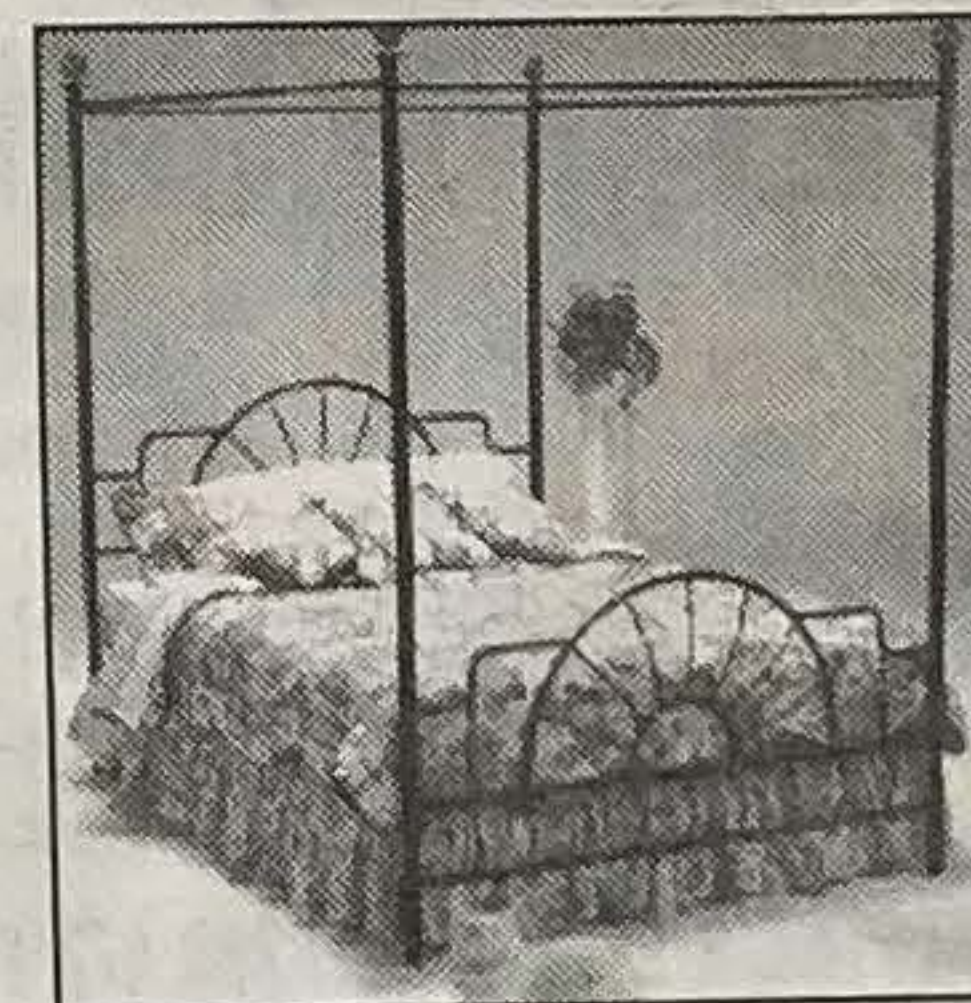
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Mythic journey

Continued from page 13

the rightful king returns, he kills Mordred in combat, but receives a mortal wound himself. Reviled as one of the supreme villains in English literature, Mordred was listed as a definitive traitor in the Inferno section of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

Stephan saw it all differently. Mordred was a misunderstood antihero whose loathing of Arthur and his knights was justified; he was an outsider who came to Camelot and sat beside the man who tried to murder him as an infant.

"I pictured Mordred spending the rest of his life having to deal with this, slinking around terribly traumatized and having nightmares about it," he says. "Because of

ents that, when the time came for surgery, he demanded to be made a man—medical risks be damned.

"I told them that after having a lot of time alone to think about it, I had decided that I might be a transsexual," Stephan says.

His parents were stricken, panicked, confused. They had no choice but to tell him the truth.

He was *not* female. Never had been. The female identity under which he had labored all these years had been a well-meaning lie undertaken at the advice of doctors.

"Obviously, I was upset," he says, with chilling understatement. "I understood why they had done it, and I understood why they were now trying to convince me that it was still better for me to have an

way," he says. "Were I to be granted access to a B-52 bomber for one day, and the ability to fly it and operate its weapons systems, Highland Park High School is the first spot I would target for incineration.

"I would nuke it into oblivion without a second thought and laugh while everybody burned."

In fall of 1967, when Stephan Grundy was an infant, a young man who would later become a pivotal figure in his life was feeling like an outcast.

It was homecoming night at Highland Park High School and the football field was packed with cheering fans. A skinny, baby-faced junior named Scott Davidson was ascending the bleachers with a cup of coffee in each hand and scanning the crowd for his date, who was perched in the middle of a group of hyped-up young men and their girlfriends.

The guy who started the fight with Scott Davidson that night punched one of his arms, scalding him with coffee. Enraged, Davidson hurled the cup into his assailant's face, and the fight was on. They rolled down the bleachers, knocking other students aside, kicking and gouging each other until they fell onto the cool grass.

A cop broke up the fight—and ejected only Davidson.

"I felt like everything was stacked against me there," Davidson says. "I didn't like anybody and nobody liked me. Nobody even knew me, really."

Davidson was a loner, a fantasy buff, an actor, and a precocious writer of fiction and poetry who was reading Shakespeare in its original version at age eight.

Which is why, as a DISD teacher at the Arts Magnet 17 years later, he took an active interest in a tuba- and harp-playing, fantasy-reading transfer student named Stephanie Grundy, who had cast off "Adrian" and now preferred to call himself "Steve."

"She was into a lot of the things I'd been into when I went to Highland Park," Davidson says. "And she was a loner in the same way I was."

It was August 1984, the beginning of Grundy's senior year. For several years, Davidson had been teaching English literature, coordinating a student-produced literary magazine, and refereeing a creative writing class full of teens who were already beginning to develop distinctive prose styles.

Now teaching English at a private academy for gifted students in California, Davidson says he never knew "Steve"

Grundy was a different sex than that listed on school records, and it didn't occur to him to ask, partly because gender-bending was relatively common at Arts

Magnet. In interviews, he still speaks of Stephan as a female, even though he recently heard through friends that she was always actually male. His reminiscences are punctuated by pronoun mishaps.

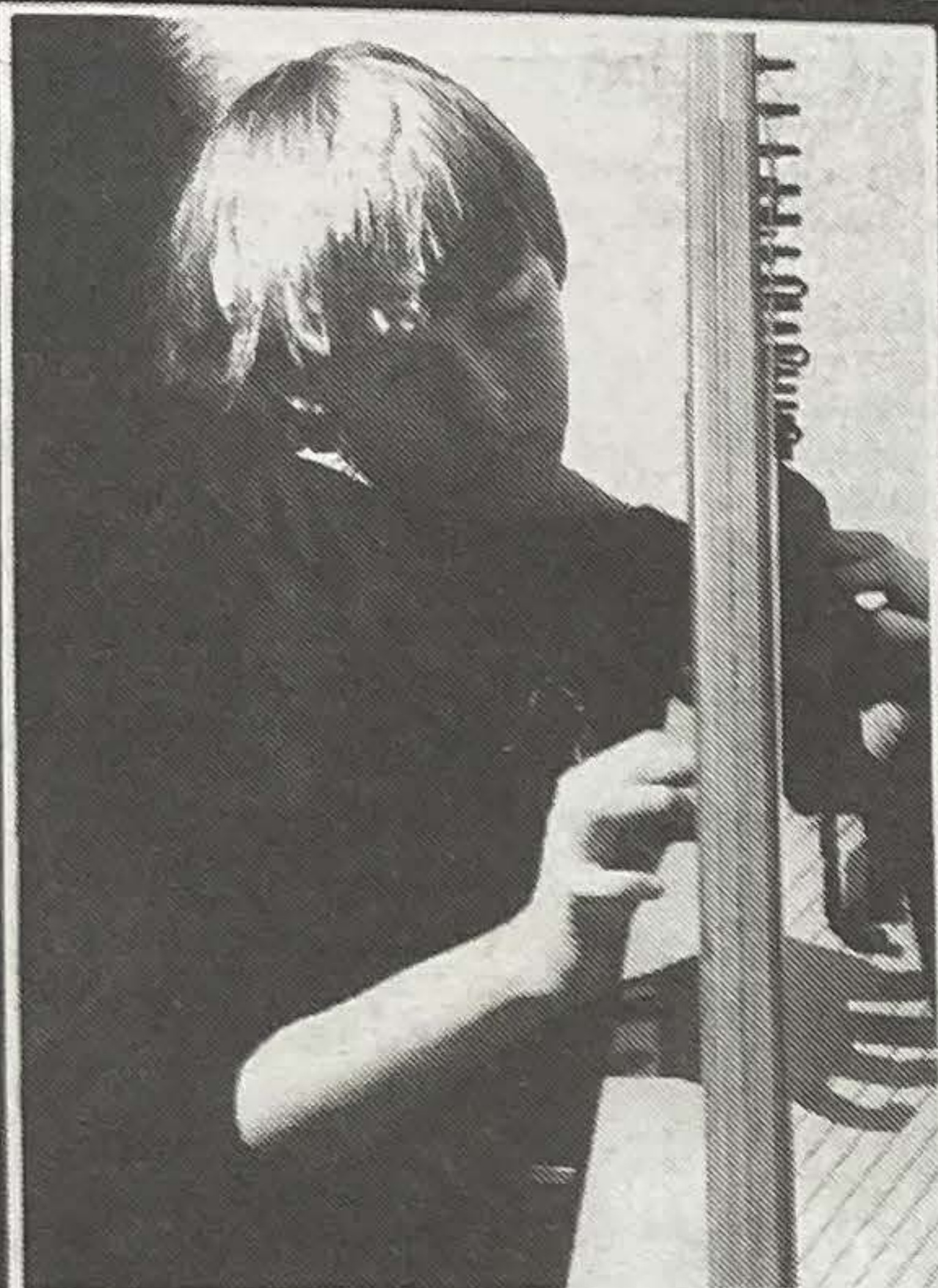
"Most of Steve's peers seemed a bit awed by her talent," Davidson recalls. "And she was so incredibly excited about her own work that it was almost funny. One of my most clear memories of her was the day, early on, when she came up to my desk with this huge box that contained a manuscript of the Norse fantasy novel she'd been working on in Germany and going, 'Okay, you'll read this tonight, and tomorrow...'"

Continued on page 19

THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM

Who has bright red hair, plays four instruments (including the bagpipes), is a National Merit Scholarship finalist, an Arts Recognition and Talent Search Semi-finalist, and is the leader of the Nerd Cult at AMHS? STEPHANIE GRUNDY (or "Steve" as she prefers to be called). Steve was more than happy to comply with the Muse staff by telling her life story. "I am a refugee from Preppyville, better known as Highland Park. I did not like it there because they did not like my chainmail and leather boots as com-

"You dare call me preppy?" Steve wears authentic Medieval attire.



pared to their oxfords." She went on to say that she has studied in Germany for six months, written several books on Arthurian legend, and enjoys working with leather and smoking a pipe in her spare time. Also, Steve does not believe in war unless it is one-to-one combat with primitive weapons. "If you want to know more about my life," said Steve, "just read the play *The Man From La Mancha*. Like the main character in that play, I am reaching for the impossible dream."

On her beautiful Celtic harp, Steve plays a song which she wrote called "Black Forest Duet."

Off with your head! Steve holds the antique axe which she always carries when she goes to Scarborough Fair.



Fellow high-school students recognized "Stephanie" Grundy's talents but still treated him as an outsider.

this, Mordred is more aware than anyone of the dark side of Camelot."

To illustrate this, Stephan spent the next few weeks writing a 330-page novel about Camelot from Mordred's perspective, then sauntered into Fish's class and plopped the manuscript nonchalantly on her desk—perhaps expecting a cold-eyed critique. What he got was stunned silence.

"She was overwhelmed," Stephan recalls.

He submitted the manuscript to a variety of New York publishing houses and

operation to make me definitively female—because even with all the accompanying social and psychological problems it would bring me, it would be nowhere near as medically dangerous as having an operation to make me male."

He decided to risk it anyway. And his parents agreed.

From that day forward, Stephan struggled to prepare himself. He planned to transfer to the Arts Magnet High School for Performing and Visual Arts in downtown Dallas. He decided he would call him-

"Secretly I'd have liked nothing better in the world than to shred them."

got back a flurry of rejection slips. But he wasn't fazed. Some of his rejecters were kind enough to enclose notes encouraging him to keep at it.

Stephan did just that, penning short stories and poems and novels, completing some projects and abandoning others.

In fall of his junior year, he went to Germany as part of an informal exchange program with a family that knew the Grundys. Stephan spent a semester wandering the German countryside and polishing a violent sword-and-sorcery novel based on Norse mythology.

And he obsessed over his psychological predicament. He decided that when he returned to Dallas, he would tell his par-

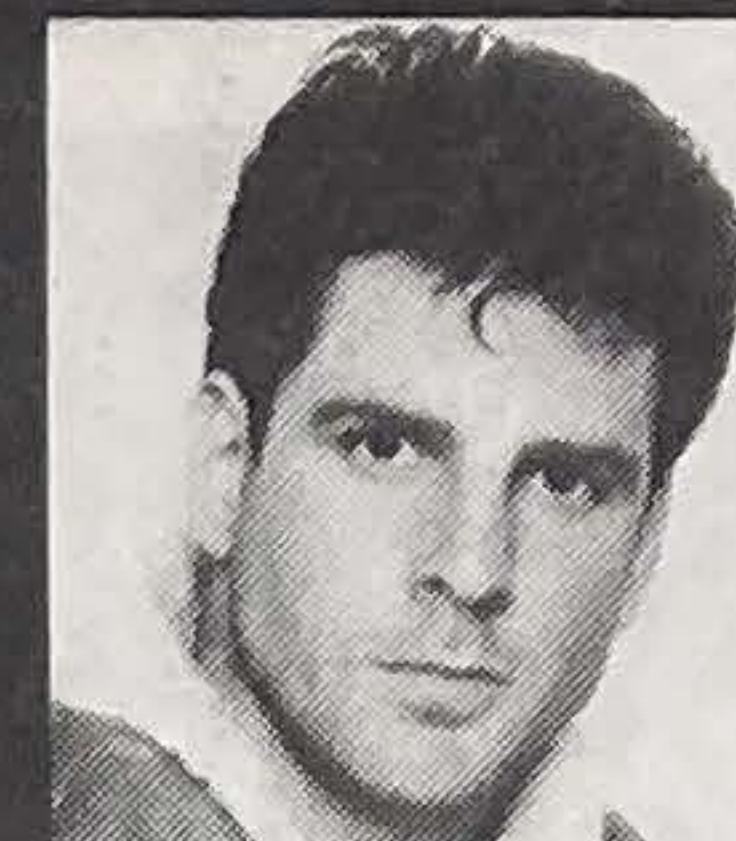
self Steve and try to think of himself, and present himself to peers, as masculine.

His last semester at Highland Park, though, was his most traumatic; the hostile attitudes of classmates, and some teachers, cut more deeply in light of what he now knew about his gender. His interests didn't make matters any easier. While other kids were idolizing Madonna and Tom Cruise, Stephan aligned himself with Mordred. "Butch and hermaphrodite were the words they used to describe me, often to my face," he says. "The more charitable kids there merely thought I was a lesbian."

But although Stephan says he understands their hostile attitudes, he has yet to forgive them. "Let me put it to you this

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Mythic journey

Continued from page 17

row you'll tell me what you think.' The damn thing was 600 pages long."

And, Davidson recalls, it wasn't very good.

The use of language was impressive throughout, especially coming from a 17-year-old. But the book was repetitious, excessively violent, and shot through with characters and situations Davidson had seen done before—and better—countless times.

Davidson said so.

Steve didn't take it well, he recalls.

"We butted heads," he says. "I warned Steve, 'Beware your facility with language. The ease with which you write is your biggest strength. But it's also your worst enemy, because it keeps you from growing up as a writer, from pushing into unknown areas.'"

No slouch at spotting subtext, Davidson surmised that the more disturbing elements in Steve's fiction—characters who physically transformed their identities to

Davidson implored his student not to submit it. He said the contest favored realistic fiction. He argued for *Memphis Spring*, a contemporary story Steve undertook at his teacher's urging, which concerned a sexually ambiguous young Memphis man whose grandmother has Alzheimer's. He believes his genes are cursed and that he will someday have it, too. He takes refuge from this fixation in a world of fantastic poetry.

Even though the protagonist hates high school, he decides to attend his senior prom. His date is a girl who's in love with him, but whose very femininity repulses him. He has a rotten time; afterward, she entices him to a moonlit graveyard and offers herself to him. He has sex with her—not because he wants to, but because he believes society expects it of him. He goes home consumed with self-loathing.

Memphis Spring won its author semifinalist status, plus a trip to Miami and a \$1,500 check. Steve basked in the glow of this triumph for weeks. So did Davidson, who felt vindicated.

But his pupil wasn't as easily convinced. Sitting at home that New Year's Eve with the folks away at a party, Steve raided the liquor cabinet, got drunk, thought about talent and destiny, and made a crucial decision.

"There are two schools of thought on this matter," Stephan now says. "One is that you should write what you know. The other is that you should write what you love. I chose the latter."

"All that aside, I have to say that Scott Davidson is almost certainly the primary person to thank for my current prose style. But whenever I'd tried to sit down and write the kind of grotty realistic novels about Third World peasants he was so enamored with, I'd get disgusted and bored. It wasn't me."

Once Davidson accepted this, their relationship settled into a less formal groove. They became friends. In addition to fiction, they also discussed Steve's personal development. "The gender issue was sort of an unspoken thing between us," Davidson says. "She did bring it up every now and then—usually in an oblique way—but it was obvious it dominated her thoughts."

Davidson speculated that Steve's colorful outward accouterments—the kilts she wore to school during her Scottish and Irish phases, the suit of chain mail armor in which she clanked around the hallways—might actually be stifling her creativity.

"What I tried to tell her was that you don't have to work so incredibly hard at being different," Davidson says. "You don't have to manufacture this bizarre, otherworldly persona—it's there already, that difference."

"It's not necessary, literally or figuratively, to wear armor."

Maybe so.

I went to school with Stephan at Arts Magnet when he was listed in the yearbook as Stephanie and went by Steve.

My initial introduction to him came on my first morning there, when I heard his bagpipes echoing through the school halls. I followed the sound to the back of the building where the band hall was housed. There, standing in front of the rehearsal room door, was a diminutive, red-haired, strangely elflike figure in a kilt, bleating out music to the world—maybe a girl, maybe not. I had never seen anyone like that before. I averted my eyes and moved on.

The moment was indicative of the

Continued on page 20



Grundy is also a sculptor, jewelry maker, and woodworker: pictured is his parents' favorite piece, "Wotan Hanging from the Tree of Life."

gain control over their surroundings, an obsession with alienation and exclusion, the graphic rending of flesh—were too vivid to have sprung full-blown from the student's imagination.

The point he kept making to Steve was this: why address these issues by writing about knights and gods and elves and faeries? Why not deal with them in contemporary settings?

The answer he kept getting, in one form or another, was: *because I am not you.*

The flashpoint arrived in fall, when the school's more ambitious students were preparing entries for the annual Arts Recognition Talent Search, a competition open to all high schoolers nationwide. First prize was \$3,000.

Steve wanted to submit chapters of the Norse novel along with a favorite short story entitled *The Faerie Ring*, about a Scotsman who becomes depressed after his girlfriend rejects his marriage proposal, goes into the woods near Inverness to kill himself, eats a magic mushroom, takes a psychedelic trip into a fantasy realm with the Queen of Faeries—then wakes up invigorated, ready to go on living.

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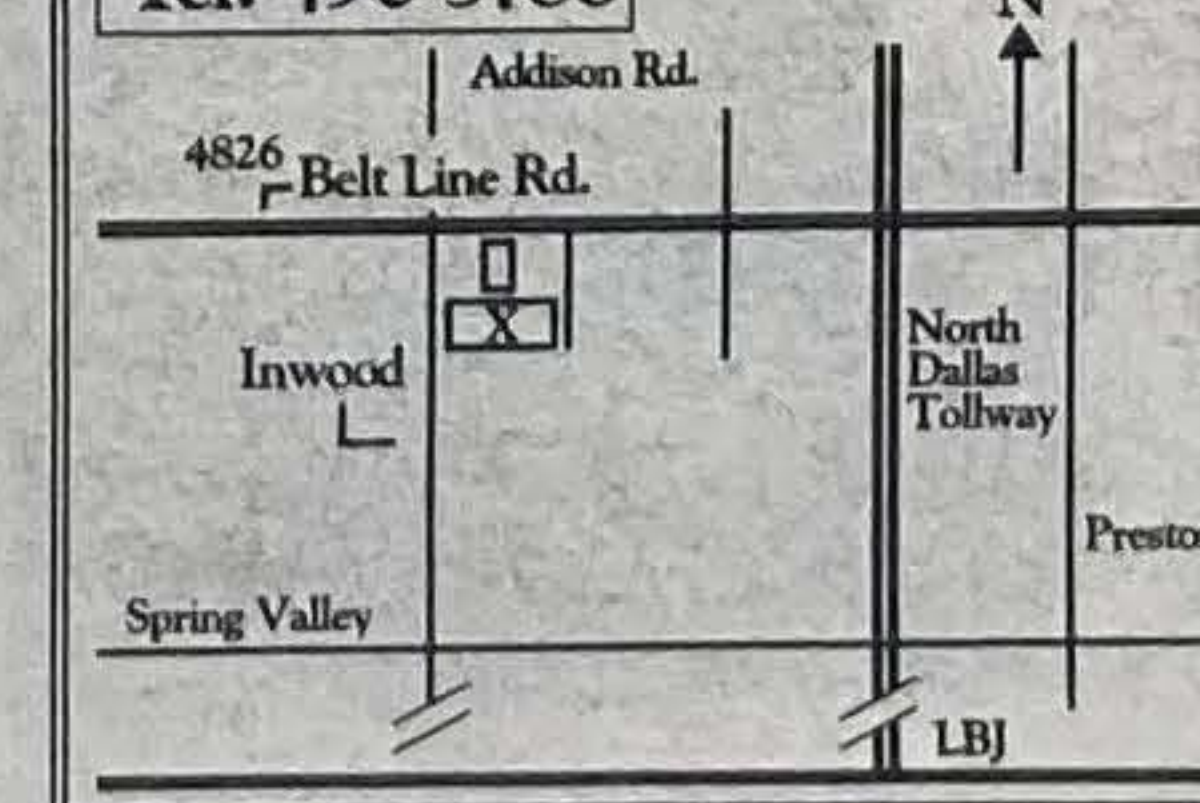
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Mythic Journey

Continued from page 19

school's overall attitude toward Steve. Even in a haven for misfits, he was too odd to be accepted.

Since so many of his peers could not be bothered to get to know Steve Grundy, they created a misinformed mythology instead: Stephanie Grundy was a girl who hated being female. When she graduated, her parents gave her a sex change operation as a present. And she became Stephan.

If only the truth were that simple.

The summer after graduation in 1985, Stephan Grundy took an academic trip to Ireland and communed with nature in a small thatch cottage near Limerick. "For the first time, I lived as a male and presented myself as male," he says. "It was wonderful."

Returning to Dallas, he enrolled in Southern Methodist University. As a freshman, Stephan—who now identified himself as male, and proudly cultivated a few scraggly wisps of chin hair—took classes in medieval history and literature. The histories of ancient cultures thrilled him. He would eventually major in German studies, along with English, and graduate with degrees in both—Phi Beta Kappa, magna cum laude, with a gauntlet full of awards from both departments.

Prior to his sophomore year at SMU, in the summer of 1987, Stephan went under the knife at Dallas and Galveston hospitals.

After a lifetime thinking about it, he'd decided the doctors who diagnosed him as an infant gave his parents the wrong advice. Even though surgical technology had advanced tremendously in the last two decades, Stephan knew it would be easier for surgeons to make him a woman, but he didn't care. He wanted to be definitively male.

And so, like a stoic Norseman from his early fiction, he steeled himself against pain and death and marched into hell. He spent the summer recuperating and taking "exceptionally revolting" medication.

The following spring at SMU, our paths crossed again. We had fiction classes together with C.W. Smith, a professor with four novels under his belt. I spotted Stephan en route to Smith's first class of the year—a smallish figure in a loose-fitting white shirt.

We recognized each other.

Tongue-tied, I kept staring at his stubbly face and spindly legs and feet, which were covered with a fine matting of hobbitlike hair.

"Hi," I said, uncertain what to call him.

He smiled. "Stephan," he said, extending a hand. "We went to high school together."

As if he were the kind of person I'd ever forget.

In class, it was clear Stephan had found his authorial voice long ago; now he was yodeling and singing scat. The short stories he'd present were varied in tone, from slapstick comedies about his friends in the Society for Creative Anachronism—a medieval re-creation organization—to fantastic Viking reincarnation fantasies. They incorporated linguistic affectations forged from his knowledge of ancient tongues and modern syntax, giving ordinary phrases a musical cadence. "End of summer" became "summer's end," "song of runes" became "rune-song," and small beads of sweat became "beadlets." The effect was language that would work as well sung or spoken.

His accounts of pagan magic were even more striking. Stephan didn't just write of rituals; he described unearthly scents so vividly you could smell them, and otherworldly voices so concretely you could hear them in your head. The completeness of Stephan's vision, and the tremendous detail with which he articulated it, shook the classroom to the core.

"He was not a person who made small talk," C.W. Smith says. "He was into Celtic mythology, runes, and the occult. He was almost always barefoot no matter what the weather, and he always had this kind of Native American-looking medicine bag around his neck."

"I never got up the nerve to ask him what was in it, but I could only imagine that there were rodent bones and herbs and powders in there."

I still didn't become friends with Stephan—this time because we really did run in different circles. While I was busy trying to make friends on campus and move out of my parents' home, Stephan was becoming involved with a group of neopaganists who got together regularly

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STEPHAN GRUNDY
Der Sigfrid-Mythos
neu erzählt

UTA RANKE-HEINEMANN
Argumente gegen eine
Religion der Ängste

ANNE TYLER
Ein fast unbeachteter
Held des Alltags

A cover story in a leading German literary magazine compared Rhinegold to Wagner.

to worship, study historical texts, and practice casting magic spells.

The group's leaders were a married couple named Sherri Ann Harrington and Robert Crain Meek. A martial artist and student of Norse mythology, Harrington, who went by "Ann," worked as an integrated-circuit designer at Texas Instruments and plowed her paychecks into her neopagan lifestyle, purchasing ritual equipment and books for the other members of the circle and crossbows, knives, and other weapons for herself—as well as supporting her husband, who was unemployed.

Despite the occasional ugly fight, the two were considered a fated couple; Harrington had come through two bad marriages and Meek through one to find each other. Like Stephan, both had been born with debilitating medical conditions. Harrington was 80 percent deaf, but preferred to lip-read rather than wear a hearing aid. Meek had a nonmalignant brain tumor that was eventually corrected through surgery.

Stephan liked the fact that they accepted him completely, sexual identity change and all; shortly before he met them, he had broken from the Society for Creative Anachronism because, he says, they were

Continued on page 22

Mythic journey

Continued from page 20

hostile about his gender confusion.

"Rob became one of my best friends, and so did Ann," Stephan says. With other members of the circle, they feasted together on holidays at the couple's small house in Arlington and held ritual ceremonies in the back yard which caused neighbors to peg them as Satanists.

In the summer of 1989, Stephan left America to study the roots of Norse mythology firsthand. Over the course of a year, he traveled through Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Scotland, staying in youth hostels and writing a new novel.

Then an envelope came in the mail bearing a pleasant surprise. His friend Meek had contrived to introduce Stephan to a woman named Christi Ward. Five years his senior, she was also a practicing neopagan and a member of the Society for Creative Anachronism. She would later join The Ring of Troth, an international Norse religion organization to which Stephan belonged; the group communicates through electronic mail.

They clicked. Soon Ward, who worked as a secretary for an insurance company, was sending him love letters from her home in Fort Worth. Stephan responded with missives that sometimes ran longer than his short stories.

"She was truly a wonderful person," he says. "And we were deeply in love, simply crazy about one another."

When he returned, he began seeing Ward constantly. He was definitively, biologically male now, and more than ever he felt the change; in his head, he was a sensitive poet-warrior crossing the seas to join his adoring woman.

When he started school again, they were everywhere, crossing the main quad arm-in-arm, kissing on benches, snuggling on the steps of Dallas Hall, and making goo-goo eyes at one another. If there had been a rule against public displays of affection, the SMU rent-a-cops would have slapped the cuffs on them.

Later, when Stephan graduated and a professor read a list of his awards and honors longer than the Magna Carta, spectators marveled at the dopey grin that sat on his face like a cartoon banana. Was he really that happy to be graduating? No; he was smiling at his love.

"I would nuke Highland Park High School into oblivion without a second thought and laugh while everybody burned."

In mid-October of 1990, Stephan proposed marriage, and Ward accepted. Over Christmas—or Yule, as the neopagans call it—they had a formal engagement ceremony at the Harrington-Meek house.

The young writer took another life-changing step that semester: he presented C.W. Smith with a 1,300-page manuscript of an epic, mythological Norse novel called *Rhinegold*. "It was like a doorstep," Smith says.

It was also a great read. In between the dramatic morphings of gods into men, and the bloody transformation of men into corpses, Stephan had made room for brotherly love, family feuds, greed, lust, courtship, childbirth, even tips on Norse

writing, weaponry, and cooking. It read not like a first novel, but a career-capping final statement.

Even Smith, who wrote realistic novels and had no love for fantasy, was impressed. His suggestions were common-sense: shorten it, tighten the narrative, cut down on the language tricks so readers don't tire of them.

Beyond that, Smith says, he did little more than mail the manuscript to his contact in New York City.

"He was pretty resistant to instruction," Smith says. "But then, he was clearly somebody who'd been marching to the sound of his own drum his whole life and was very good at what he did. By that stage, that kid didn't need a teacher. He needed an agent."

Stephan recalls those days wistfully. "That was a happy time for me," he says. "Until the murder, of course."

On the night of February 17, 1991, Rob Meek called the Arlington police to report that his wife was missing.

Two months later, Meek led police to Ann Harrington's body—hidden under a mattress in a field near Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport. At the time, Meek, who had done the deed but had yet to admit it, didn't cooperate with police; as a result, they suspected Meek's involvement with neopaganism and the Society for Creative Anachronism had led to the killing.

With suspicions fanned by neighbors who told police they'd seen Meek, Harrington, and company dancing around in robes in the backyard at night, detectives investigated Harrington's death as a cult slaying.

Turns out one of the murder suspects was Stephan Grundy. Police confused his pseudonymous identity as a Norse reference book author with that of a different writer based in Austin, with whom Meek had been feuding publicly for years.

Stephan spent many hours with Arlington police, trying to convince them he and the Austin writer weren't the same, and that his neopagan friends did not practice ritual sacrifice. Furthermore, Stephan informed the police, he had amiably parted ways with the Harrington-Meek circle several months before the murder, and was in the

process of establishing his own neopagan sect.

Soon afterward, Meek confessed to beating and stabbing his wife in her sleep after a nasty argument. One year later, he would be found guilty of first-degree murder and sentenced to 99 years in Huntsville.

After Meek confessed to police, Stephan fell into deep depression and anger. The couple had been like a second family to him.

"For a long time, I was consumed with shock and horror," he says. "I simply couldn't believe Rob could have been capable of doing something like that. She loved him so deeply. And he killed her in her sleep."

While Stephan concentrated on finishing school and coping with the aftershocks of the murder, Sally Wofford Girard, Stephan's contact at the Elaine Markson Agency in Manhattan, shopped *Rhinegold* around to various American publishers. She had trou-

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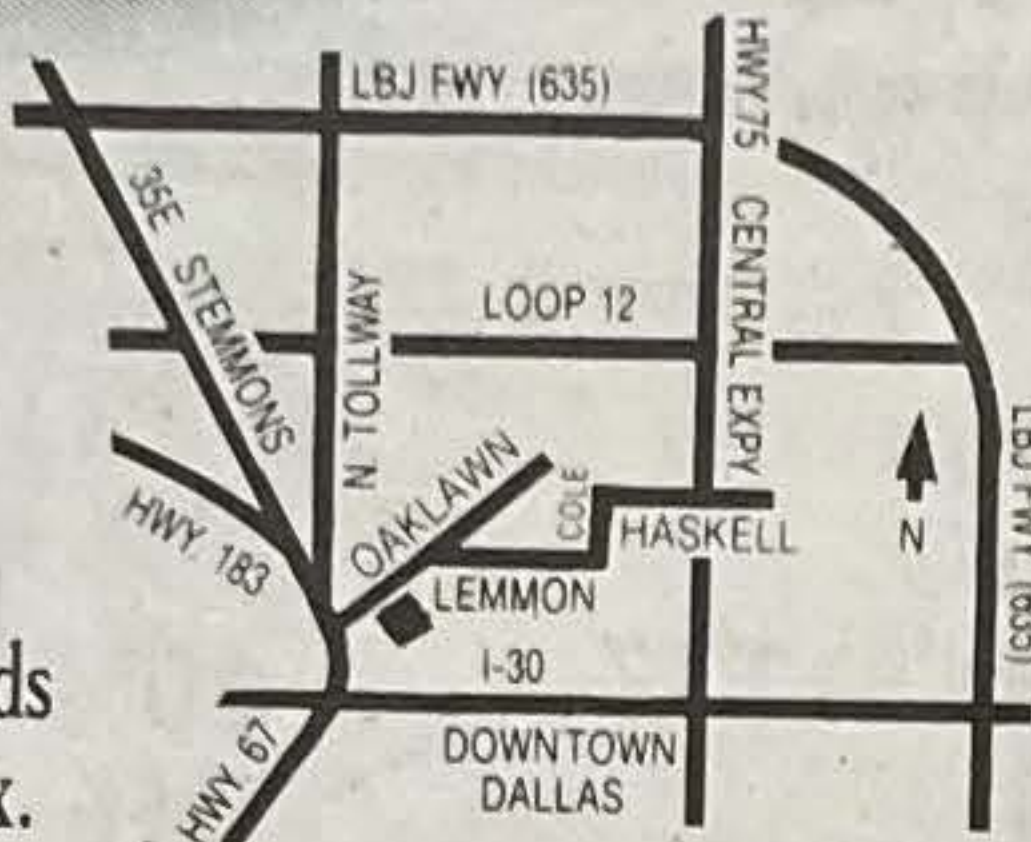
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ble selling it because of its massive size.

That is, until one fall day in 1991, when Girand and Elaine Markson were sitting in a Manhattan restaurant talking about *Rhinegold* and waiting for Peter Wiffert, a representative from a respected German publishing house, S. Fisher. When he arrived, he found their discussion so fascinating he begged them to continue.

Wiffert was German. His publishing house was looking for a potential best-seller. *Rhinegold* was a fantasy book that just happened to concern the same gods and heroes as Wagner's operas. It was a match made in Valhalla.

"By the time Elaine and I were done talking," recalls Girand, "Peter said, 'I want to publish this book.'"

Girand soon negotiated a small advance for her client, and in February, 1992, the manuscript was sent to a small office on the island of Malta for translation. Stephan went along. He stayed for two weeks. The work took longer.

He stayed involved in the translation even after enrolling at Cambridge University. When a mischievous translator altered the book's ending without Stephan's consent, the author—who read and spoke German fluently—caught the change in a proof his agent had sent. He successfully demanded the novel's first printing be halted and the vandalism undone.

Since 3,000 books had already come off the presses, employees of S. Fisher had to physically go through the initial run of *Rhinegold* and tear out the last three pages of every copy. It was a nearly unprecedented occurrence, especially when ordered by a first-time novelist.

Rhinegold was published in Germany in October, 1992. It became a sensation, selling 70,000 copies in hardcover and landing its author inside the pages of *Der Spiegel*. In November, *Buch Aktuell* magazine, a journal of literature and ideas as respected in Germany as *The New York Review of Books* is here, put the young American on its cover. Inside the issue was a biography of Stephan Grundy and a lengthy analysis of *Rhinegold's* relationship to Wagner's operas.

That month, Grundy went to Germany for a university conference on Norse and Germanic legends. A tabloid wrote a lengthy feature on him without ever interviewing him, making up facts with gleeful abandon and selling the story under the headline "The Blond Man from Texas."

Stephan soon found that strangers recognized him on the street. When he entered a small bookshop in Bonn one day, the clerk behind the counter grinned with pleasure, and said in English, "You are Herr Grundy, aren't you?"

Stephan says, "Partially, I think the book's success has to do with the reunited Germany's search for identity. After all, the novel is an investigation of the roots of the German mind."

Yet aspects of it struck a modern nerve. The theme of gold bringing political corruption resonated strongly in a nation which, only three years earlier, had been divided into capitalist and communist territories.

"Considering the German phobia of neo-Nazis there, I doubt a German publisher could have gotten away with a novel that had echoes of Wagner if it was actually written by a German," he says. "But somehow, the fact that I was The Blond Man from Texas devenomized the media's response. They seemed relieved in a way. Here was an outsider presenting their myths on a large scale for the first time

since the taint of the 1930s."

It was the German publishing event of the year. Stephan says that in 1993 alone, he made over \$100,000 from *Rhinegold*.

On the strength of its sales in Germany, the book was picked up in the United States by Bantam, one of the world's largest publishers of fantasy and science fiction, and by Michael Joseph in Britain. In April, it was issued simultaneously in both countries.

With a small initial printing and little advertising or promotion—it is, after all, a first-time novel competing in a very crowded field—the book has become a steady seller. And it hasn't been ghettoized; customers of Borders and Bookstop are as likely to find it on the "New Fiction" wall as in "Fantasy/SF."

In October, the novel will be issued in paperback by Penguin, a subsidiary of—you guessed it—Viking.

Critically, *Rhinegold's* reception has ranged from affectionate to rapturous; Stephan Grundy has been hailed as a major new voice both in trade rags like *Publisher's Weekly* and *Kirkus Reviews*, and genre magazines like *Locus*.

Writing in the respected British science fiction and fantasy journal *Interzone*, veteran book reviewer Chris Gilmore called it "a true classic." His article on *Rhinegold* invoked Richard Wagner, C.S. Lewis, and J.R.R. Tolkien. "Altogether, this would be an extraordinary achievement from a writer with a string of awards covering decades," Gilmore wrote. "For a first novel, it's breathtaking."

Gilmore expressed concern that the book might be appropriated by neo-Nazis in Britain and elsewhere—an issue that has troubled Stephan for some time. He understands it.

But as a scholar of the past, not the present, he resents having to dance what he calls "The 'I Am Not a Nazi' Polka."

"Between my visible individuality and my health problems, I would certainly have been one of the first ones into the van under the Nazi regime," he says.

Sally Wofford Girand says the German paperback rights, book club rights, and sales to other national markets—including England, Denmark, Italy, Holland, and Spain—will eventually fetch Stephan the equivalent of his advance several times over, and that in addition to several European film producers, Steven Spielberg's Amblin Entertainment briefly courted Bantam for the screen rights.

Informed of this recently in an *Observer* interview, Stephan has to have Spielberg's pop culture stature explained to him, complete with a recitation of film titles, before his memory is jogged.

"I live in the 14th century, you know," he says, laughing. "That's why it's important to have an agent who lives in the 20th."

The prodigal Norseman has come home from England for the weekend. And he's tanked.

The two of us stumble woozily out of Los Vaqueros in Snider Plaza and walk south toward the Grundy home. Stephan talks about his new projects—a book about Attila the Hun; another that interweaves tales of fated love from the pre-Christian era, the fifth century, and today.

He tells me that his engagement to Christi Ward broke up; they simply couldn't sustain a trans-Atlantic relationship. But he's engaged again—this time to Melodi

Continued on page 24

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Mythic journey

Continued from page 23

Lammond, a neopaganist woman several years his junior whom he met last summer during a trip to San Francisco. In August, Lammond will fly to Cambridge to live with Stephan and act as his personal research assistant. They were engaged over Christmas but haven't set a wedding date.

He invites me to come to a party thrown by some pagan friends. I accept.

The Grundy home is festooned with Stephan's jewelry, books, and elaborate woodcarvings. The most striking of these, which rests at the top of the stairs, is a large piece he hacked out of a tree stump. It's called "Wotan Hanging from the Tree of Life." The front of the stump is carved into a gallows. Hanging from it is the figure of a slim, one-eyed man. He's supposed to be Wotan, but I can't help noticing how eerily he resembles Stephan as a teenager.

"Stephan," Lois Grundy calls from downstairs. "Would you come here, please?"

The young warrior-poet obeys.

"Stephan, have you been drinking?" I hear her asking him.

I make my way downstairs, suddenly locked into a teenage mindset, convinced my presence in the living room will cause Stephan's mother to back off. It doesn't.

"Stephan? Tell me the truth."

"Yes, mother," Stephan says, shoulders slumping.

"I'm very...concerned," she says.

"I know you are, mother."

"We'll talk about this later, Stephan."

The doorbell rings and in comes Stephan's ride. It's a couple named Godfrey and Bobbi. Bobbi is a plump, dark-haired woman wearing a druidic-looking gown tied with a gold rope sash. Godfrey is a grinning, bearded Irishman with wild red hair in a puffy shirt and leggings. He asks Lois Grundy in perky, singsongy tones: "May I trouble you to use your *loo*?"

When Godfrey returns, we stand in the foyer while Stephan goes upstairs to get some cigarillos for the party.

"Be careful, Stephan," his mother says, as her son sprints out the door.

"I will, mother," he chimes sweetly.

We pile into Bobbie's sedan and drive to a tiny cottage in far East Dallas, home of a cab dispatcher. The walls are covered with representations of unicorns, and the place is swarming with cats; when the homeowner's teenage son perches on a footstool with a paper plate full of food, the felines arrange themselves in front of him in a perfect phalanx, eyes bugging out.

The house is packed with Stephan's friends. More arrive by the minute; they're all on hand to welcome him. Stephan explains that most belong to The Ring of Troth.

Out in the backyard, Stephan weaves among them, shaking hands and hugging and, at one point, doing a jig to convey how happy he is about his publishing success. Behind him, two women loiter over a barbecue grill, slapping one giant slab of red meat after another on the fire.

He seems at home here. But then, it occurs to me, he probably feels at home everywhere—digging pre-Christian artifacts out of the ground in Northern Europe, trading hearty toasts with Germans in Bonn pubs, loping along the dirt roads of Ireland and England with a medicine bag and mead horn.

He feels at home because home is inside him; wherever he goes, his adopted world—a mist-shrouded Germany a thou-

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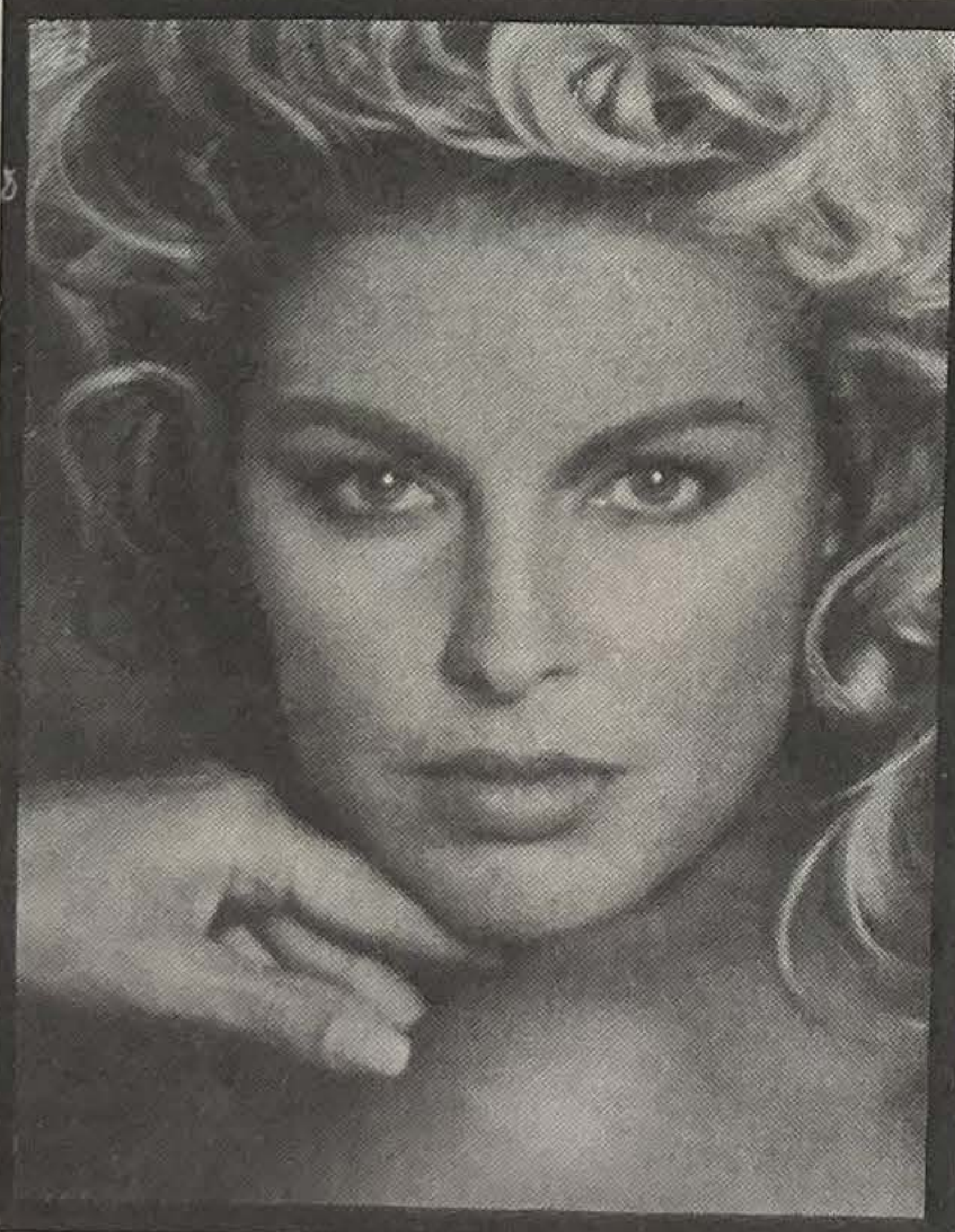
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sand-plus years old, populated by dwarves and faeries and gods and heroes—goes with him.

Finally, Stephan says he has to go. He makes the rounds again, hugging his pals good night.

Afterward, Godfrey tells me to take off my shoes. It's time for a neopagan education.

He leads me into the middle of the backyard to a circle bordered by small stones, ringed at nearly equidistant points by four trees. Each tree, he says, represents an element. At dawn every Sunday, he and a band of friends gather together there to celebrate the rising of the sun and to affirm their allegiance to their personal gods.

Not all of the circle's members are Norse followers, although some are; they're a mixture of Druids, Thorists, and other pagans. But they all have one thing in common: they believe Christianity persecutes them, and they blame it for nearly extinguishing—a thousand years ago—a religion and way of life they are trying dutifully to revive.

After the explanation, a young man named Rob Patrick—a slim, fresh-faced fellow with long dark hair, wearing a Jedi-looking robe—takes me aside.

"So you know Stephan? Pretty great guy, huh? That's why he's here," he says, indicating the circle of stones.

Patrick explains that Stephan will return at dawn to join a ceremony honoring Ostara, the neopagan Germanic holiday from which Easter takes its name. Then he'll observe Patrick as he leads the ceremony. It's part of Patrick's ongoing education as an elder—an authority in Wotanism who holds the same stature as a priest or rabbi. Patrick has been studying ritual texts for months to prepare for the ceremony. He's confident Stephan will approve him.

Stephan Grundy, he tells me, is a Warder of the Lore, a title that carries the same cachet in Norse religion as the Pope does in Catholicism. (Although any pagan worth his mead would shudder at the comparison.) The Ring of Troth organization's administrative side is in San Francisco. Its spiritual headquarters is Stephan's house in Cambridge, England.

They E-mail him from everywhere with questions about history and ritual and lore. Stephan Grundy is the chief authority on all matters Wotanic. He's the supreme high priest of a religion that has been extinct for a millennium—and is being revived, thanks in large part to his tireless research.

It occurs to me that there's more than a little irony—and cosmic justice—in what Patrick has just said. All through his life, Stephan Grundy felt persecuted, vilified, and alone. Now he's a full-blown icon in Germany and a cult figure in the United States—and the head of his own worldwide religion. Hundreds of devotees correspond with him personally. Thousands more know him abstractly, as a distant figure whose awesome intellectual and spiritual authority they can barely fathom. He is revered the world over.

"Stephan's a really important guy," Patrick says earnestly. "Didn't you know this?"

Later, in a follow-up interview, I tell Stephan what Patrick said.

He tells me about his daily ritual in Cambridge—two hours in his office each day doing nothing but writing letters and posting E-mail responses to people with questions about Wotanism.

Then his voice becomes hushed, even

reverent, and he tells me about the first time he felt the physical presence of Wotan.

It occurred during his semester abroad in Germany. The family with whom he was staying took him on a trip into the mountains of Southern Germany—into the heart of the black forest.

"In every little tiny town through which we passed was a little tiny church with a church bell on top of it," he says. "The inhabitants ring those bells to keep the ghosts of trolls and such out of town and up in the mountains where they belong. It was the late 20th century, and here were vestiges of paganism that lived on."

"We hiked on foot into the mountains, and I got lost from the group, wandering, just roaming around among the trees. In the forests of Germany, the fog can form into distinct patches just the size of

human beings. And that's what began to happen all around me. Clouds of fog came down over the tops of trees, slowly, twisting. The wind was howling very loudly. I saw men and horses riding down over the treetops.

"I realized that this was not a trick of my imagination. I was actually seeing ghosts of the hunt, images from a thousand years ago or more. I felt a chill through my bones. It was the ghosts that I was feeling. I was hearing cries and hunting horns. I was feeling the presence of Wotan."

"All of us eventually got to the top of the mountain by different means and reunited. We stood together and looked out at the landscape around us. The mountaintop was just standing there, isolated, like an island in a lake of mist, out of reach of the town and the church bells, out of reach of modern civilization. I

thought to myself that this was probably how the land looked a millennium ago—a timeless place. And the gods were all around us."

As Stephan Grundy finishes his tale, his voice dims from impassioned to calm—eerily calm, as if he's found a perfect center of gravity in the moment.

It's characteristic of his confidence—so intimidating to some, so inspiring to others. After systematically chiseling his own persona from a life of strange and sometimes painful experience as if it were a block of wood marked for carving, Stephan Grundy now carries himself, and speaks of his life and work, like a man who is utterly secure in who he is and where he's headed.

It's a blissful state few can hope to achieve in a lifetime; that Stephan has attained it so early is a bit scary.

Clearly, Wotan has been good to him. □

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